

TWO goals from Runcorn leading striker Barry Whitbread ended Wycombe Wanderers dreams of a place in the last 16 of the F.A. Trophy on Saturday. But the Blues deserved credit for a fighting performance that almost earned them a replay in this second round tie.

Whitbread, singled out as a major threat before the game, certainly lived up to his billing of one of the Northern Premier League's top goalscorers. In two Trophy games this season he has rattled in six goals while his two fellow strikers, Kevin Finnigan and Barry Howard, made up the most dangerous attacking spearhead Wycombe have faced this season.

It was the difference between the two sets of forwards that decided the game. In the second half, Wanderers got in only a handful of strikes at goal but nevertheless there were some fine individual performances from the Blues.

Mick Holfield returned for his first game in three weeks and got Wanderers off to a perfect start by scoring in only the second minute. John Maskell kept that lead

## Runcorn 2, Wycombe Wanderers 1 REPORT BY STUART EARP

intact by saving a penalty just before half time while no one could fault the work rate of Howard Kennedy and John Priestley. It almost goes without saying that centre backs Keith Mead and Alan Phillips performed their usual heroics at the heart of the defence.

But in the end, it was Runcorn who just about deserved to go through and they will take some stopping in this competition due to their powerful striking force. Wanderers have the satisfaction of reaching the second round for the first time but that did nothing to sweeten the bitter taste of defeat, especially after their thorough and professional preparation for the game, which included an overnight stop in Altrincham.

Wycombe had a considerable slope in their favour for the first 45 minutes and it was clearly up to them to make the most of it. They could hardly have wished for a better start. After Phillips had headed Finnigan's early effort off the line, Howard Kettleborough picked up the ball near half way and found Holfield on the left. Mick ran on, looked to have lost the ball to Mal Bailey, won it again and poked a shot under the oncoming goalkeeper Mal Rawlinson.

The goal boosted Wycombe's confidence considerably. They won deserved applause for their clever attacks and accurate passing but the Runcorn players were far from impressed and some uncompromising whacks were handed out

### KING BOOKED

This dominance continued throughout the first half thanks to the fine work of Wycombe's midfield trio, who matched Runcorn's hard tackling and won many 50-50 challenges.

There was always danger when Runcorn attacked, however, and Holfield saved another dangerous moment when Maskell only half stopped Howard's deep cross. In the 29th minute Runcorn skipper Alan King was booked for a foul on Kettleborough. It was not before time.

Things were looking good for the Blues until the 10 minutes before half time when Runcorn threw everything forward in a bid to get back on terms before the interval. Only a miraculous save from Maskell stopped them in the 37th minute. Tim O'Connor crashed in a 25 yard drive that struck the foot of an upright. Whitbread was on the loose ball in a flash and his shot looked a certain goal from point blank range. But the prostrate Maskell suddenly stuck out a fist to deflect the ball away.

In the 43rd minute Finnigan drew Maskell out of his six yard box and crossed over to the far post but again Phillips saved the day by heading off the line. Ironically it was Alan who gave away the penalty in the 44th minute. He stopped Finnigan's cross with his arm and referee Seville had no doubts about the decision. Up stepped Barry Howard but Maskell guessed the right way and produced a marvellous save from the spot.

That save was the biggest confidence booster Wycombe could have had — and yet within 90 seconds of the second half, Runcorn were on level terms.

The big question of the minds of Wycombe fans was how would their team fare going up the slope which would obviously test their resources to the limit. The question was soon answered. Runcorn got the ball over from the left and as it bounced loose for a second, Whitbread pounced to fire in a tremendous drive from 12 yards. Maskell hadn't a chance.

This was a body blow for Wanderers so early in the half and for the next 20 minutes or so they came in for a rare hammering. Paul Birdseye struggled to contain Howard on the left while Finnigan and Whitbread menaced whenever the ball was at their feet.

There was one moment of relief for Wanderers in the 52nd minute when Peter Cruse put Ian Pearson through. He chipped the ball over and Rawlinson palmed the ball onto the top of the crossbar.

### FIRM GRIP

As Runcorn's midfield men began to take a firm grip so the chances accumulated for the home forwards. They went 2-1 up in the 62nd minute. As the ball came out from a corner, King thumped in a drive from the edge of the box. Maskell did well to parry the shot and as the ball ran loose — again for only a second — Whitbread was there to bundle the ball home. Several Wycombe players claimed Whitbread had handled before scoring and the referee had a long look at his linesman before awarding the goal.

To their credit, Wanderers fought their way out of a difficult spell and many felt that were robbed of a penalty in the 65th minute. Peter Duff handled the ball at least a yard inside the penalty area and the linesman signalled the offence. But after consultation with the referee, an indirect free kick was awarded three yards outside the box. There was no doubt in my mind, nor the minds of the players, that Duff handled inside the box. But the pleas of Peter Cruse and others fell on stony ground.

Fraser replaced Kettleborough after 71 minutes, enabling Holfield to move up front. The move signalled a brave attempt by Wycombe to bring Runcorn back for a replay. Holfield was soon in action running 30 yards down the left and crossing deep to the far post where Kennedy dived in but saw his header blocked.

But the closest Wycombe came to an equaliser was via the head of Phillips in the 79th minute. He was some 12 yards out when he met a cross from the right and angled in a brilliant header that looked to be going just under the bar until Rawlinson launched himself to tip the ball over the top.

Runcorn had their backs to the wall in the last few minutes, pulling 10 men back whenever danger threatened. Wanderers were almost caught out as they pushed men forward in the closing stages but despite all their efforts, they just couldn't break through.

It must have been a long journey back for the fans.

**RUNCORN:** M. Rawlinson; T. Rutter, M. Bailey, P. Duff, A. Murphy; J. O'Connor, A. King, S. Hipwell; T. Finnigan, B. Whitbread, B. Howard. Sub. P. Spencer (not used).

**WYCOMBE:** J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, R. Davies; H. Kennedy, J. Priestley, M. Holfield; P. Cruse, H. Kettleborough (sub G. Fraser 71 mins), I. Pearson.

**Half-time:** 0-1. **Goalscorers,** Wycombe Holfield (2), Runcorn — Whitbread 2 (46, 82).

**Referee:** A. Seville (Birmingham). **Attendance:** 1,880.